



Joseph Nechvatal, *return tO Order II* (2004)

*Pierre Morelli : What is the role of art and artists in the new technologies of information and communication?*

Joseph Nechvatal : The role of art in this context, for me, has not changed enormously. It remains that paradoxical role of serving no specific purpose. Hence its role is one of defending by manifesting ideals of freedom of thought, expression and imagination. However, if art is to reflect its contemporary status, I feel that it must work with (or on the subject of) the technology which most defines its era. In my work I am developing the idea of OvOidism. OvOidism is about a certain mode of being in the ready position of unconscious excessive. OvOidism is a sort of sullied Epicurean Hellenism created through the mixing of virally infected testicles, ovaries, breasts, bums, eggs, fruit and eyes. As such, OvOidism depicts that we are becoming the benumbed and disproportionate genitals of our virtualizing machines. In OvOidism the love/hate unconscious genital/machine combat cannot be reduced to the sum total of our repressed fears.

*Pierre Morelli : What part could artists play as regards technological developments (i.e. as regards the emergence and development of innovative tools)? - an exploratory role? (In this case, which are the artist's relationships with the multimedia computer in the exploratory strategy?) - a popularizing role? - a critical role? Is it a creative diversion of the technology, or a personal appropriation in which the technology is put to use in a broader creative approach depending only on the artist's will?*

Joseph Nechvatal : Like I stated above, the role of the artist in the technological field is to have no specific role – thus multiple (and conflicting) roles are possible.

*Pierre Morelli : How do artists approach the new technologies of information and communication? Is it a combinatory and associative approach integrating the concept of chance? Is it a pre-programmed approach? Is it a pragmatic approach?*

Joseph Nechvatal : I like to work with the digital in its predominant visual form, the immaterial abstract information of pixels and I like very much the world wide transportable dimension of the Internet, where the digital data-stream travels at the speed of light. But I also like to see a large-scaled semblance just sitting still on an unchanging canvas so I can silently reflect on it and move within the work in natural light at my leisure with customary unrestrictions to my bodily movements. So for me the process is one both combinatory and hybrid. Particularly combinatory in that within my a-life computer virus attacks a largely random element is at play.

*Pierre Morelli : How do uninitiated artists respond to the new technologies of information and communication: with acceptance or mistrust?*

Joseph Nechvatal : I have seen both responses. A healthy mix is preferred.

*Pierre Morelli : The new technologies of information and communication and the notion of work of art ? What happens to the notion of work of art in the digital technology? Does the questioning of the concept of unity and having at your disposal powerful and high-performance tools result in disappointing position as compared to an earlier, allegedly “clearer” situation, or does this constitute a breakthrough and the beginning of a new era?*

Joseph Nechvatal : I feel that art becomes “viractualized” in this situation (see below). But I only feel comfortable with this question speaking for myself. I do not wish to generalize.

My art now is a matter of visualizing viractual aesthetic sensations linked to technological and sexual concepts. It is essentially a mental prosthetic for both the perfunctory machinic and the luxurious corporal domain.

Of late, I have been working more on the theme of hermaphroditism in my art - in parallel with the viral. For me the hermaphroditic sign serves as emblem of the variance that characterizes virtualism. In an age of networked incredulity, where hierarchies are put into crises by the digital, the hermaphrodite becomes the harbinger of new creative territories by flickering between static boundaries.

The function of my art is to create, by extenuation, different technological-aesthetic precepts. More specifically, my recent computer-robotic assisted paintings are an investigation into the sphere of the pan-sexual under the conditions of what I call "viractuality" (occasions where the virtual and the actual merge) - circumstances which are not quite historically conditioned yet. To do this, my computer-robotic assisted paintings focus on an interface between the virtual and the actual (the viractual) by putting the classical canvas in confrontation with informatics.

I myself have only been disappointed with the audience.

*Pierre Morelli : Can we talk of digital art? If so, what is a digital work of art?*

Joseph Nechvatal : Yes, we can if we wish to. See, for example, Christiane Paul's new book called *Digital Art* (Thames & Hudson) 2003.

I think we can - but should not anymore. Everything is digitally inflected now. We run the risk of falling into a formulaic formalism by concentrating too much on the tools. Better to speak of viractual art.

*Pierre Morelli : Under which conditions can the stamp "work of art" be attributed? Who is competent then? On which criteria? Which relationships do the latter have with traditional criteria?*

Joseph Nechvatal : When one takes an interpretative metaphorical view of viractual art broader than the typical, somewhat fatuous, materialist/reductive explanations one soon detects that the concept of art itself is an *open concept*. The concept of art itself is *pantheoristic*. But in my use of the term (based on my activities as an artist) I understand viractual art to be fundamentally an extravagant activity expressing in a symbolic language the desire for joy. For me, philosophy is a method of understanding and technology a method of doing art.

I should establish that the pantheoristic definition of art which I am upholding here, and which I find requires reiteration as artists move increasingly from organic materials to the use of electronic and synthetic ones, is basically that supplied by Susanne Langer in her book *Feeling and Form* where she determines that "art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling". (Langer, 1953, p. 40) Furthermore, in answering the question of how art feels, Ms. Langer proposed that the symbolic space created in painting was not real but *virtual*. But I think that I do not fully know the answer to this question other than art is what artists say it is.

*Pierre Morelli : Would a multimedia storage of artistic experiments and events be judicious? If so how could new technologies of information and communication be put to use? Which types of recording should be carried out? Which conditions should be set up to warrant the objectivity of this storage?*

Joseph Nechvatal : Well the creation of adequate storage means does seem to be the big challenge of digital art. I am concerned with the so-called disappearance, de-materialization or de-objectification of the artwork. For some, this, and other factors, leads inevitably to the end of art. What happens to art if it is practiced only as an unenduring, momentary activity? Will the future have any idea of what is going on now if the art which best typifies our electronic era is largely ephemeral and often becomes quickly obsolete – technically speaking? Indeed that is why I find the proposition of a static lasting digital artwork most satisfying for me now.

*Pierre Morelli : What are the influences or the practical consequences of multimedia technology on the artist's style? How does the technological state-of-the-art influence the artist's work?*

Joseph Nechvatal : With the increased augmentation of the self via micro-electronics feasible today, the real may co-exist with the virtual and the organic fuse with the computer-robotic. Consequently, I am interested in a new interlaced sense of artistic viractuality which couples the biological with the technological and the stable canvas with the ephemeral digital.

*Pierre Morelli : How does multimedia technology influence creativity? Given the huge number of technological possibilities, is imagination boosted — awakening due to the variety of interconnections and/or to their accumulation, stimulation (reassuring effect) or incitement (to experiment with everything) — or is it inhibited? What is the place of imagination in a technological world?*

Joseph Nechvatal : My work's extensive ornate excess attempts to give to us an expansive metaphor for our computational condition - our state of digital-assisted being. In the rising and collapsing of alternative sexual visualizations and unordered revelations seen in the work, the circuits of the mind may find a dexterity exactly congruent with the viractual's configuration.

*Pierre Morelli : How is multimedia technology integrated into the artist's palette? Is it a mere tool or is adapted to the artist's personal style? Which kinds of hybridization does it give birth to? Which transversal re-investments?*

Joseph Nechvatal : My viractual computer-robotic assisted paintings and software presentations strive for a depiction of an anti-essentiality of the body-in-bits which allows no privileged sexual logos, but insists, rather, on a displacement or deferral of meaning. Here images of the flesh are further undone by viral disturbances they cannot contain.

*Pierre Morelli : Are the effects of the new information and communication technologies: stimulating (confidence, encouragement), inciting (challenge) or inhibiting (over diversification, discouragement, psychological inhibition ...)?*

Joseph Nechvatal : For me this condition is one of excitement. This viral-viractual-visual situation creates ribald opportunities for transgressions of conventional erotic limitations. In my work's pan-sexual interlacement, aphrodisiac thought detaches itself from the order and authority of the old signs and topples down into the realm of viractual reverie.

*Pierre Morelli : What part do computer models play? Are these models limited or unlimited?*

Joseph Nechvatal : My use of maquettes plays a major role in my working process. Viractual contemplation is certainly the most erudite area of our unconsciousness - as it is the deep down depth from which we beings emerged into our precarious, but glittering, existence.

*Pierre Morelli : How does reversibility — i.e. the possibility to get back to earlier phases in decision-taking — influence the creative stage?*

Joseph Nechvatal : The digital arts are rhizomatically diagonal as they transpire, at least partially, in deep digital space - and in a sense secure a subterranean immersive space for us to enter if we ask them to. Relevant is that under recent epistemological scrutiny is what Jacques Derrida has described of as logocentrism: the once held distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity. Today,

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with heightening telematic connectivity, these logocentric distinctions are breaking down under the pressure of viractual, telematic and immersive art technologies.

*Pierre Morelli : Is it time-saving or is it a source of indecision because of the extra choices on offer?*

Joseph Nechvatal : The reversible aspect is a powerful draw for the art student more than for the artist. My desire is to go forward and create new works – but yes sometimes I advance by drawing from things I have done in the past. I accept this, as pan-sexual desire is by definition reversible - as is the digital technology that creates it in my case. So the fit is a good one. It causes me no problems with time. For me viractual time is deep time.

*Pierre Morelli : What are the consequences of the possibility of doing mistakes and correcting them permitted by the machine, which did not exist with earlier technologies (such as sculpture, painting, engraving, ...)?*

Joseph Nechvatal : In painting, the act of addition and subtraction has always been a large factor. So is it with digital tools – though faster.

*Pierre Morelli : How is the recording of intermediary steps reflected in decision procedures, as far as responsibility is concerned?*

Joseph Nechvatal : By identifying an individual's hyper-real presence in a vaporously technologically stored set of bits, the post-modernist existential concept of the logocentric individual has been supplanted by the fabulated electronically produced simulacrum-persona. This quality of phantasmagorical replacement has formulated a new understanding of phallographic existence which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called schizoid. According to them, being is now inseparable from a technologically hallucinogenic-schizoid culture. With viractuality this understanding of consciousness has become central to post-industrial art and now supplies our hyper society with a rich metaphorical tool with which to understand itself.

*Pierre Morelli : To which ends do artists keep track of the creative process stages which can be retrieved thanks to the storage of the steps in the creation of the work of art?*

Joseph Nechvatal : In our viractual age - given our heightened condition of maximizing data-flow - once fixed logocentric identities based on Euclidean spatial distinctions are being continuously

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transposed by malleable, telematic, computational, and immersive configurations of self-awareness as the borders of the conventional logocentric object/subject relationship computationally bleed. Hence hyper viractual immersion - with its insinuated inside-Omni-everywhere insight - is becoming the pertinent concept for the recognition of being in art.

*Pierre Morelli : As far as taking responsibility for one's own artistic creation is concerned, how is the delegation of tasks to the machine carried out, and how does this delegation affect creativity and the artistic creation?*

Joseph Nechvatal : In 1967 Sol LeWitt wrote in *Artforum* that "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work...the execution is a perfunctory affair." I asked myself, why perfunctory and not voluptuously languid?

*Pierre Morelli : Is it necessary to establish new constraints so as to mark out the seemingly unlimited free space (the realm of possibility) ?*

Joseph Nechvatal : No, because like philosophy, viractual art exceeds lived experience by creating an approach to chaotic virtuality.

*Pierre Morelli : How are personal desires and the technical constraints due to the machine and the creative environment reconciled? What do the multimedia contribute to this organization?*

Joseph Nechvatal : I agree with Deleuze/Guattari in their book "What is Philosophy?" where they say that "The artist brings back from the chaos varieties that no longer constitute a reproduction of the sensory in the organ but set up a being of the sensory, a being of sensation, on an anorganic plane of composition that is able to restore the infinite."

Salient to this consideration is what I take to be a significant development in art. This development is the blending of computational virtual space with ordinary viewable space and objects. Such a blending indicates the subsequent emergence of a new immersive topological cognitive-vision which, as I mentioned above, I call "viractual space" - the space of connection betwixt the computed virtual and the uncomputed corporeal world which merge.

This viractual space can be further inscribed as the viractual span of liminality - which according to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (based on his anthropological studies of social rites of passage) is the condition of being on a threshold between spaces. I wish to suggest that the term (concept) "viractual" (and "viractuality") may be a concordant conception helpful in defining this

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third fused inter-spatial place of the emerging arts which is forged from the meeting of the virtual and the actual.

*Pierre Morelli : The technologies which act as prostheses for the eye redefine its conditions of use. How do the new technologies alter the way artists and "spectators" perceive the work of art?*

Joseph Nechvatal : It is fast becoming a cliché to use the term new technologies when they have not been new for 20 years or more. Most people view such work as cold and impersonal though.

But even more than viractuality, it is the principle of non-logocentric telematic immersion as applied to the emerging arts which interests me, as I find electronically fabricated worlds only superficially connected to technological means - and more properly concerned with ideals of self-transcendence.

The fundamental change in aesthetic perception engendered by immersion, a perception which is connected to the ideal of total-immersion in virtual space, identifies certain shifts in ontology which are relevant to a better understanding of the human being. This understanding was achieved through a broad inquiry into the histories of Virtual Reality, philosophy, and the visual arts and has led to the formulation of an aesthetic theory of immersive consciousness indicative of immersive viractual culture.

A primary subject of the viractual arts is immersion then: an experience identified as the indispensable characteristic of Virtual Reality. The understanding of immersion to the viractual arts informs encounters and concepts of virtuality and hence "viractuality". To sufficiently address this subject in a scholarly fashion, I researched, found and accumulated aesthetic and philosophic examples of immersive viractual tendencies, as found within the histories of art and philosophy, which subsequently contributed towards the articulation of what I have come to call "immersive consciousness". As a result of formulating such an immersive consciousness, a good deal of the basis for the questioning of the Western ontological tradition has been found in the Western tradition itself when we look with new eyes and ask new uncertain questions.

This emerging viractual activity however is deeply rooted in the past. Indeed, my active presupposition for looking into viractual immersion was that there have been manifested, during certain moments in time, ideas of immersion which approach what we know today as the virtual and the viractual. These moments also are suggestive of disembodied experiences and expectations notable to virtuality, viractuality, and particularly to Virtual Reality.

Viractual thinking, as stimulated by the immersive spherical perspective, today opens up a territory of signification and possibility for the creation of emergent hybrid and deterritorialized meanings.

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With viractual immersion, meaning in art - and in life - advances by seeing more clearly the underlying assumptions of excess inherent in the immersive outlook, by facing up to the radical implications of those assumptions, and by purging the viractual arts from conventional ways of thinking.

*Pierre Morelli : How do artists exchange their experiences, if they do?*

Joseph Nechvatal : By showing their work and seeing the work of others. Certainly the space of cultural has dramatically changed with the revolution in technology brought about by the rapid development of the networked computer. The Internet has created a new geography of relations that could only be imagined as little as twenty years ago. And of course, art cannot help being of its time and place, but the interesting question to ask about art that deliberately comments on its time through the use of the latest technological innovations is what makes it more than mere commentary? What makes it art? As Goethe put it, "only the mediocre talent is always the captive of its time and must get its nourishment from the elements that time contains." The insistence that art reflect only the tangled realities of high-tech life is a temptation that most digital artists, in my view, should resist.

This pertains to the emerging viractual arts in that encounters with immersive computer simulation, one may assume, might create an opportunity for personal transgression and for a vertiginous ecstasy of thought and hence excel the assumed determinism of the technological-based phenomenon inherent (supposedly) in our post-industrial information society.

*Pierre Morelli : How do the new technologies of information and communication help artists diverge from what is already there and hence produce something new, in others words: create something?*

Joseph Nechvatal : The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, of baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment which leads to a recreation and a reinvention of the subject itself.

Indeed it seems to me that as human psychic energies are stifled and/or bypassed by certain controlling aspects of mass informational technology, such a hyper hybrid ecstatic phenomena will most likely increasingly break out in forms of what I call viractual thinking - an immersive dimensional thinking which may result in viractual art which attempts to include everything of perceptual worth within its domain ambient but coherently and accordantly in an overall enveloping totality that is concerted, continuous, and without overly evident frame or border.

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Immersion's fundamentally spherical, all-over perspective of dynamic thresholds cast a fraction of art on its course since the *Fin-de-Siècle*. This marginal tendency has now amply flowered in the emerging viractual arts as art practice began shifting VR away from its initial paeon to illusionistic trompe l'oeil. Moreover, with this immersive viractual vision there is a shift to a more conscious peripheral mode of perception which entails a deautomatization of the perceptual process (whereby more emphasis is placed on what is on the edges of sight and consciousness) thus presumably adjusting the immersant up to an expanded and fuller consciousness. This emphasis on the peripheral utilizes the Deleuzian broad scan; Deleuze's non-linear dynamic conceptual displacement of a view along any axis or direction in favor of a sweeping processes in space/time. Hence immersive viractual vision may acquire an increasingly computational-like encompassing range useful in expanding the customary field of view - which is 160° vertical by 180° horizontal - outward so as to increase situational awareness.

*Pierre Morelli : How is the technology involved in the creative process: does it interfere analogically or differentially?*

Joseph Nechvatal : Technological consciousness provides the substructure from which a new viractual art is emerging. Specifically, this viractual art is predicated in the telematic and the immersive. Expansive simulation technology (when used in the creation of electronic-based art) will promote an indispensable alienation from the socially constructed self-necessary for the outburst of such ecstatic experiences/acts. Inversely, electronic technology will enable the contemporary emerging artists to express ecstatic reactions in ways never before possible. Thus, this ecstatic counteraction might provide a phantasmal defiance aimed against the controlling world's blandness. This aesthetic philosophy might provide, then, a fundamental antithesis to the authoritarian, mechanical, simulated rigidities of the controlling technical world.

The emerging viractual arts, when postulated from the previously described immersive slant, promote various theories of consciousness which themselves have been discussed as being emergent rather than representational. Indeed Sigmund Freud identified an artist as one who offers insights into an emergent consciousness as consciousness emerges from within the unconscious realm.

*Pierre Morelli : What is the influence of the technology as far as performance, limits and time-delays are concerned?*

Joseph Nechvatal : The viractual arts are all in a way hyper. The strategy of hyper-anything includes principles of networked connections and links which give multiple choices of passages to

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follow and continually new branching possibilities. The hyper telematic/immersive suggests that the viractual body is but the temporary hardware housing a vast and luminous software immateriality. In this realm of discourse the corporeal is a complex compendium of multiplicity and distribution which adds up to a total-art work (gesamtkunstwerk) - though an undiagramic one.

*Pierre Morelli : Which are the influences of the new information and communication technologies on creation and “production”?*

Joseph Nechvatal: The viractual/telematic/immersive is the construction of a convincing transactional singleness beyond the realm of the corporeal; a realm which suggests a world of connectedness which spans from many to many - united rhizomatically into an expanded hyper-unity. Here the corporeal heavy weight of the body takes on a lightness of being.

Certainly it is true that hidden in us and in connected computer space there is something so large, so astounding, and so pregnant with the darkness of infinite space that it excites and frightens us and thus returns us to the experimental and to a state of stimulating desire and perceptual restlessness.

From my point of view, the artists who are or will be working with the power of the viractual are embarking on a new vanguard phase of artistic awareness in which immersive involvement is the primary characteristic. This means for art an emergent reconception within which philosophic problems of consciousness are foregrounded. This entails a rich and diverse practice.

The viractual artist's work then is the electronically aided creation of unfamiliar emotive abstractions of enjoyment. The significant cognizant value of abstract artistic symbols is that they may confer flickering ideas which exceed the interpretant's former understandings with unaccustomed emotive possibilities and scintillating expressive values which may be characteristic of even deeper inner pathos and jubilant non-logocentric unfamiliarity's. And this is as it should be, for the technique of art is to make our understanding of both perception and history at first unfamiliar, particularly when attempting to increase our comprehension of, and neurological feeling for, viractual data-space and its vast powers for handling complex and abstract information.

Thus the central issues of the viractual arts fall necessarily on and between ideas concerning consciousness, philosophy, telematic/immersive space, art, joy, sexuality, myth, cognition, information-technology and metaphysical states of placement and quintessence in the formation of a theory of immersive connectivity that, I believe, is important for artists and theorists today.